

Philip Yancey in his book Prayer writes:

I have sometimes wondered why God places such a high value on honesty, even to the extent of enduring unjust outbursts. As I review the prayers recorded in the Bible, I am startled to see how many have a tone of petulance: Jeremiah griping about the unfairness; Job conceding “What profit should we have if we pray unto him?” Habakkuk accusing God of deafness. The Bible schools us to pray with blistering honesty.

Walter Brueggemann suggests one obvious reason for candor in the book of Psalms: “because life is like that, and these poems are intended to speak to all of life, not just part of it.” Brueggemann finds it jarring to visit upbeat evangelical churches and hear only happy songs, when half of the psalms are “songs of lament, protest and complaint about the incoherence that is experienced in the world. At least it is clear that a church that goes on singing ‘happy songs’ in the face of raw reality is doing something very different from what the Bible itself does.

The raw reality is that we are sometimes angry with God, anxious about tomorrow and depressed about life. We are people who are standing in the need of prayer.

The lament of Jeremiah is one example of life on the rocks, “*Is there no balm in Gilead?*” Or, “*My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick.*” Jeremiah is standing with his people. He has heard from God the future and what will come upon them if they continue on the path they are on. He knows their anguish, pain and suffering. He also understands that God is only keeping the promises (conditions) God made in their covenant relationship. God is keeping God’s word. Would we want it any different? We know that most of the politicians are not going to keep the promises they have made over the past 18+ months. However, we also acknowledge that they are not God and we want a God who keeps promises. Jeremiah longs for renewal, restoration, forgiveness and repentance for and from his people. The situation is reversible.

What is the balm of Gilead? Gilead was a region not far from Jeremiah that was famous for its healing balm. The balm was used by physicians to treat wounds and sores as part of their medical treatment (whenever I read this I think of Bag Balm!). However, no one is willing to go and get it and if they do there is no physician to apply it. Why? They don’t feel they stand in need of prayer or forgiveness. They keep on doing what they are doing, after all, “we are the people of God. God’s chosen. We have nothing to fear. Is not God always going to be on our side?”

Move ahead and read the 36<sup>th</sup> chapter of Jeremiah. Jeremiah has delivered his scroll of God’s judgment to the King at his winter palace. There is a nice hot fire in the fireplace, the king is seated with his feet facing the fire and the scribes are reading the scroll. As sections are read the king takes his knife and cuts them off and tosses them in the fire. He will not admit that things might be wrong. He will not admit that life is not being lived as God has required. In the midst of all the wrong and injustice in the world they keep singing ‘happy songs.’

Jeremiah understands the gravity of the situation. If only his people would listen, “*Why is there no healing for the wounds of my people?*”

Philip Yancey in his book Prayer shares the prayer of a man named Isaac, from Singapore, entitled *After the Tsunami*:

God, we cry for the victims, even more so for those who do not believe in your name. Have mercy on us all. Surely, it pains our hearts to see people suffer greatly in this tsunami catastrophe. Sometimes it makes us wonder if you care at all. I know you did not punish us because of our sins, for you came to save the sinners. We know you love us, for you came to die on our behalf. But why do you choose to be silent now?

Why was the world made imperfect with so many fault lines lying underneath? It could not be our doing that caused the fault lines, could it? Does it pain your heart to see families separated, young lives taken and wasted?

We know a pot cannot question a potter, we know you have the truth, and who can we turn to but you? But we cannot help but think that if a man can forgive and love his enemy, how can the author of our love let those who do not believe in him perish? Forgive us for questioning your love—we question because we believe you are love and we seek explanations for the bad that happened. **We know our questions will not be answered on earth, we just pray that you will continue to keep our faith in you alive, Amen.** (Emphasis mine.)

Paul writes to the church in Corinth. These have been difficult days for Paul and the church. He prays for them, not that they will escape the pain and suffering but through it they will be made stronger and be able to help others. Remember Paul prayed three times for a “thorn in the flesh” to be removed from him and three times God responded, “My grace is sufficient.” Or, “Live with it, Paul!” (II Cor. 12:8f). Did Paul like the answers? Probably not. Paul learned to live with it though.

How did Paul learn to live with his “thorn?” Through prayer and through the support of the community of faith. He was confident that there is one who walks with us and who walks beside us and this is supported by the faith community who lived with Paul during these days. He wrote to the congregation at Galatia, “*I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me*” (Gal. 4:15b). They were willing to walk with and to stand with Paul during the difficult days. It is their strength that helps give Paul his strength.

The Today Show on Wednesday did a segment on a group of mothers who have formed a support group. These are mothers whose children have committed serious crimes. Now they are not from the projects or slums. These are moms from the suburbs. They thought they had the “perfect family” and then they were confronted with children who committed serious offenses. They have found strength in being together. Strength to meet every day life demands, trials, etc. Why? Because they support and uphold one another daily. As I listened to these women I wondered: Is this not what the church is supposed to be? Are we not called to “bear one another’s burdens?” We all stand in need of God’s love, grace, forgiveness, restoration and renewal. We are bound by a faith in a possible tomorrow through what seems an impossible today.

We must learn to be one in Christ. We are renewed in community. Jeremiah’s prayer was not for judgment but for healing and restoration. Daniel prayed in Daniel 9 for forgiveness of the sins of his people and their restoration as the seventy years of

captivity drew to a close. Paul prayed that the congregation in Corinth might discover strength in togetherness and by walking together with each other even in the darkest hours of their faith.

We live in the consequences of a fallen world. We know the brokenness of loss, hurt, depression, anger and death. We have cried the tears. And yet it is in these times that the Church seems to have deserted us. We judge rather than love and forgive. We want to laugh rather than cry. We want to dance rather than mourn. We want to sing the happy songs. We don't want anyone who will bring us down. Yet, did not Jesus weep over the grave of Lazarus? Did he not cry over Jerusalem? Was his prayer in the garden to let the cup pass from him? He too knows that anguish we feel. When we are not sure if we can make it through, he assures us, we can—if we learn to walk together—not escape the reality of the darkness of some of our days but to walk together arm in arm with the hope that with our God all things are possible. We find our hope in the presence of others.

Two illustrations came to my mind as I prepared for this day. The first, from another pastor, a hospital chaplain. He was called to the delivery area. A child had not survived delivery and the family wanted to have the baby baptized. As they assembled he realized that he had forgotten to bring any water. What was he to do? It would be inappropriate to leave. Then he noticed the tears flowing from all their eyes. He reached over and took the tears from eyes of the mom, the dad, the nurses and himself – here he found a healing balm in the midst of one of life's darkest moments and with tears—He baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

My phone rang about 2 a.m. on a Sunday morning (now I do not get many 2 a.m. calls that are not wrong numbers) but this one was for me. Could I come immediately? As I arrived at the home I found a teen-age girl in tears on the living room floor. Now, I mean more than tears, she was wailing and sobbing. For her life was over—her Christian boyfriend had just dumped her in a most unchristian and demeaning fashion. Nothing we could say or do would console her. Even her dad who was the one she relied on had any influence this night. Our solution was to stand by and wait. (I didn't know one person could hold so much water!). Finally the tears and sobbing stopped. We held her, supported her and I whispered in her ear, "I know this seems like the end of the world but, believe me, there is someone out there for you, someone much better." This succeeded in bringing even more tears!

A few years later we were assembled in the Sanctuary. I went to the entrance to make sure that all was ready before getting the groom and bringing him to the front to wait for his bride. As I started to leave she grabbed my hand and kissed my cheek—she whispered, "I did hear what you said that night, and you were right."

Even through the tears, the anger, the darkness a light shines—a balm in Gilead.

Yancey, Philip, Prayer, Does It Make Any Difference? Zondervan, 2006 (pp. 66 and 96)